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ABSTRACT

Drawing from research and from classroom experiences, this paper suggests five strategies for use by reading teachers in helping low-achieving students write responses to comprehension questions. The strategies call for the teacher to: (1) analyze questions carefully and sequence them according to difficulty; (2) give students steps to follow in finding and verifying answers, and offer reinforcement of those steps; (3) provide ample oral practice with different types of questions and then give students ample prompts until they are comfortable with the question type; (4) respond to the process going on with a student, rather than to just the answer he or she gives; and (5) share strategies with content area teachers. (FL)

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Reading for Writing: Strategies for Teaching Response Patterns Appropriate for Low-Achieving Readers

The Problem

Gary seems bright enough when you talk to him. His oral reading is fairly fluent and close to grade level. But when he writes answers to questions about his reading, they are totally "off the wall." Obviously, he doesn't care--or does he?

Patricia writes neatly, in decent though simple sentences. But when you point out answers that have missed the mark by a mile, she just shrugs. She thinks you're picky. You think she has a comprehension problem.

Mike reads poorly, and writes even worse. You don't see how you can handle both sets of skills at the same time, and so you don't have any real expectations of him in writing. He knows it, and you get just what you expect.

These hypothetical (but recognizable!) students typify the kinds of problems that confront teachers daily. When referred to reading specialists, these kids don't write. Referred to writing classes, they don't read. More often, there's no one to give extra help at all. And no teacher could or should refer all the children s/he feels just don't quite come up to par.

Yet at the very heart of the academic years beyond third grade is the ability to respond meaningfully to a variety of reading tasks. Students

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must demonstrate their understanding by writing. This can (and should) take a variety of forms: summaries, outlines, essays, reports. Very frequently, the writing is stimulated by a question, to which a concise answer is appropriate.

For many students, these common demands are enormous hurdles to confront; here converges the duet of psycholinguistic anguish. The student who has a hard time understanding also has a hard time expressing.

There are several perspectives on such difficulties, but three concerns are especially relevant.

1. Teachers are much better trained to teach decoding than comprehension, and of course many teachers of writing have no reading training at all. Basically, commercial programs and many methods books alike set up a naive methodology: Ask a question, get an answer. Scant teaching is involved in such an approach.

2. Attacks on literal questions, and the halo hung around higher order questions have made many teachers uneasy about questioning in general. Thus, students are thrown into abstractions and complexities in the form of "higher" questions before they learn to answer "lower" ones. This view distorts the use of hierarchies to organize questions. Improving the way a critical comprehension question is worded will not improve the quality of student response if the student does not understand the text, that is, what it states explicity, what may be logically inferred, and what relationship it has to a larger body of knowledge outside the text. Furthermore, the erroneous assumption of a tight linear progression of difficulty in questions ignores the operations of the learner during reading (Lapp & Flood, 1978).

Though covert, the operations are the arena of student learning that need teacher intervention. The question is a stimulus; the thought in response is comprehension.

3. Teachers usually do not know how to respond to student answers. They are uneasy about just marking right or wrong, but little else may be done, other than to admonish students to work more carefully. Yet teacher interactions in relation to student answers are at the core of successful instruction.

Teachers, then, need:

a. some system for organizing comprehension questions, so that the difficulty of questions can be controlled, and

b. strategies for modeling and giving feedback to students on their responses.

Students need:

a. clear strategies for coping with the demands of questions so that they can use the text efficiently, and

b. clear criteria for evaluating the appropriateness and quality of their own writing in this mode.

Directives from Research

Research on comprehension. Recent research in reading has focused more and more on the operations learners use to respond to what they read. Investigations indicate that teachers can intervene to aid these covert operations.

1. The teacher can control the questions. Once teachers understand that the level of question is not the major indication of difficulty (though an important factor), they can begin to analyze questions in more efficacious ways. For example, here are three factors that contribute to the difficulty of inferential questions: (a) the "closeness" of the problem statement to the relevant information; (b) the ease with which the relevant information can be used in drawing the inference; and (c) the number of distracting sentences or passages that draw student attention away from the relevant information (Carnine, Kameenui, & Ludlow, 1978). See insert, A Scheme for Analyzing Comprehension Questions.) Teachers can then attempt to control the operations demanded of students by controlling the questions or tasks. Mastery of strategies for coping with questions implies mastery of processes of thinking.

2. The teacher can respond effectively. If the teacher listens to student answers in an attempt to infer the operations the student has used, the teacher can respond more effectively. Student thinking (how s/he arrived at the answer) can be valued and evaluated. The student can be helped to generalize from a single experience at understanding to later experiences. Thus, the teacher helps the student understand how this way of answering the question can be used again with other questions, or how this way of answering can be improved (Riley 1979; Stallings 1979; Carnine and Silbert 1979).

3. The teacher can teach systematically. Helpful strategies for students at a basic skill level are suggested by the research on teacher effectiveness (Borich 1979). A growing body of literature suggests that

teachers can effectively guide student learning by following a pattern of systematic instruction. Basically, this pattern has these elements: (a) clear focus on the objective or task; (b) small increments of instruction that "hold a child's hand" in steps small enough to take without failing; (c) ample opportunity for students to respond, with ample feedback from the teacher on the quality of the response and the steps taken in forming it; (d) prompted practice, that is practice with clear guidelines. The reader should note that this pattern has been shown to be effective with basic skills instruction, particularly of low-achieving students. It is not suggested that all teaching should follow such a pattern. However, a similar pattern has been shown to be effective in teaching reading at the secondary level (Stallings 1979).

What, then, does this mean for the teacher in the classroom? The following section answers this with one real experience.

Theory Into Practice: A Modest Experiment

During the 1978-79 school year, I worked with approximately 45 remedial students in grades seven and eight. About a third of these had serious problems in decoding, and considerable effort was expended on increasing their word attack skills, vocabulary, oral reading rate, and accuracy. The other students fell in the "gray" area of "comprehension problems." Though they insisted they could read, and were able to decode fairly well, they already had a record of failure in any work requiring writing. Their homework, if turned in at all, was a mess of incomprehensible gibberish; their tests were shorter versions of the same.

I decided to reduce a host of problems to one I could tackle: how to deal with questions about reading. I wanted to apply what I knew from research to what I knew about these kids.

First, I decided that the practice of giving students a list or page of questions to be answered, and then waiting for the answers, was NOT teaching as I saw it. I was determined that all questions would relate in some real way to the skills I was teaching; students would practice orally various types of questions before trying to answer them independently; students would learn strategies they could apply across similar tasks.

Secondly, I worked out a tentative sequence. I would start with questions that asked students to deal with small segments of text--beginning, in fact, with "one-liners"--and work toward tasks requiring more analysis of larger passages.

Third, I would establish an instructional pattern for these tasks. I wanted students to have a sense of routine, so that their psychic and intellectual energies could apply to the task, and not the extraneous elements of it. Thus, instructions followed a consistent format.

With the lower-ability readers, questions were limited throughout much of the year to those requiring fairly direct, explicit use of the text. Only in the last fourth of the year did we work extensively with inferential questions, and we did so with a great deal of oral discussion. I used generous prompts for written work, such as sentence starters, paragraph frames with portions of the answer already written, and so on. To illustrate, let me give examples of each of these.

"What did Irma say to Carol?"

To answer the explicit question above, the student looked back in the

text to find key words from the question--in this case, the names Irma and Carol. The student looked for the place where Irma said something. S/he then checked that Irma said it to Carol. S/he softly read aloud what it was that Irma said. At this point the student was ready to record the answer: Irma said...

By the time students were coping with inferential questions, we had worked at identifying thedetails that lead one to infer something further. Students could then answer an implicit question like

> What did the boarders think when Irma stopped waiting on them?

To answer this question, the student would go back through the story, listing or checking things the boarders said or did. With these details to support an answer, one student could write:

> The boarders were kinda upset with Irma and surprised at her. For example, they said "What do you mean, Irma? and they grumbled to one another after she left.

With the students who had good basic decoding skill but poor "comprehension" I followed a similar pattern, but I required more writing in response to more questions. After several weeks of practice, I directed considerable effort to teaching students to paraphrase an answer as found in the text so that other teachers would not call their answers "just copying."

Here, then, is a general frame of the steps students took in answering lower-level questions.

1. Read the question aloud. Look away and say, "I need to find out..."
2. Look quickly (scan) for key words identified from the question: names of people, times, key action words, etc. Read the section around the place where you found the key words. Does it give the information?

3. Identify the exact information you need, using either the words of the text or your own words in a paraphrase. Write the answer in a complete sentence (or sentences). Do NOT include information you don't need to answer the question!

4. If you thought you already knew the answer, go ahead and write it down; then check the text and verify the accuracy of your answer.

5. Now check the spelling of new or difficult words in your answer by carefully going back to the text for each word.

6. Check your sentence: general spelling, capitals, stop punctuation.

In order to teach students this set of steps, I worked with them many times orally. I did not assume understanding after one set of directions! I wanted to hear confirmation that students were ready to go on. Thus, each step was carefully monitored. "Debby, what information do you need to find?" "Bob, what key words will you look for in the text?" "Ruth, read the passage that gives you the information you need."

On various days, we would practice the subskills implied in these steps. We practiced scanning. We practiced reading short passages and determining which information was relevant or most crucial.

Students framed their responses out loud, in complete sentences. I did not stop with one response; I asked several students to answer the same question. They did not seem exasperated by this repetition; indeed, their willingness to respond increased, and so did the liveliness of our work.

When we began writing answers, I would guide the students through each step, and have them write only after an oral answer had been given. Then they wrote; we reviewed the answers orally again so they could check their

written responses. Feedback at that point focused on the accurate writing of what they already knew. Eventually I faded to:

Here's the question.

What will you look for?

Have you found the answer?

Write the answer.

Check your answer.

I realized as we worked that students were doing a lot of copying of authors' words. But in the beginning most of them didn't even do a good job of that. They copied sentences with words left out; they made spelling errors though the words were on the page. I accepted as progress their growing ability to "just copy" accurately. Soon I insisted on their own words. Then I moved to questions requiring more analysis of the text.

What were the results?

Students became very good at answering lower-level questions! Perhaps this does not seem like so great an accomplishment. But remember that a great many of academic questions and tasks are of this sort. Remember too that students could not perform these tasks successfully at the beginning of the year. Students became much more confident in using the textbook as a real resource. A number of students who still read below grade level nevertheless reported to me that they found their work in other classes easier now because they knew how to look for answers--even if they took longer than other students.

Strategies and Tools

Drawing from research, and from this experience--one I found enlightening and successful (oh yes, they did well on achievement tests in the spring, too!)--I suggest four strategies to the teacher who wants to help lower-achieving students respond to comprehension questions.

1. Analyze your questions carefully and sequence them according to difficulty. (See the insert.)

2. Give students steps to follow in finding and verifying answers. Write the steps down on a ditto for them; post them on a wall. Have students memorize them. Ask them if they are following the steps!

3. Provide ample oral practice with different types of questions. Then give students ample prompts until they are comfortable with the question type. These could include sample answers, sentence frames or starters, paragraph frames, charts to be filled in, etc.

4. Respond as much as you can to the process you think is going on with a student, rather than just the answer.

5. Share what you are doing with your "content" colleagues!! Show them your answer prompts, or this article. Let them know which students are working on "accurate copying" and which are learning to paraphrase. Often, content teachers are impatient with lower level responses because they don't understand how far a student has come.

Last, be patient and comfortable with the repetition of patterns. Perhaps your students will need such old shoes before they can run--or write.

A SCHEME FOR ANALYZING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Ask yourself:	Comments:
<u>Wording of question</u>	
Is the question clear, concise? Is any vocabulary abstract, ambiguous, or above the reading level of readers?	Rewrite question or explain orally.
<u>Demands of question</u>	
What kind of question is this?	Use a consistent scheme of your choice. Caution: Carefully consider difficulty of question, not depending on "type" to determine difficulty.
Is the answer to the question to be found in the text explicitly, or implicitly, or does it draw on information the reader must bring to the text?	Explicit: The answer is there. Implicit: The answer requires "pulling together" what is there. Beyond the lines: The reader must know more than the text gives.
Is the information in the text easy to spot, in relation to the way the question is worded, or does it demand operations to analyze the question?	If you want the question to be EASY, make the question use key words or phrases identical to words and phrases found in the text. Try to CHALLENGE readers when they are competent with easy questions, by using paraphrase of key words or phrases.
Does the question provide clues to the process to be used? (Example: Questions requiring analysis of cause-effect can specifically state such.)	You may want to provide a verbal or visual PROMPT--a format for the answer that cues the reader. (Examples: columns, charts, outlines, with labels or partial responses filled in.)
What kind of writing is required to answer the question?	Have students practiced these kinds of responses? ARE CRITERIA CLEAR? ARE ADDITIONAL PROMPTS OR MODELS NEEDED?

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